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# Exploring the Extent of Neoliberal Narrative and a Faux Masculine Revival in AMC's Breaking Bad

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# **Exploring the Extent of Neoliberal Narrative and a Faux Masculine Revival in AMC's *Breaking Bad***

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## **ABSTRACT**

Located within this post-recessionary period, and arguably influenced by a masculinized neoliberalism, the television show, *Breaking Bad*, focuses on the transformation of high school chemistry teacher, Walter White, into the drug kingpin of the southwestern United States. Yet there is more to consider than just Walt's transformation. Because the show is situated in this era that aims to revive the masculine narrative, the show restricts non-white, non-male characters. In that sense, this project pays close attention to the relationship between Walt and Skyler in order to reveal how the show is complicit in the revival of traditional, male-centric gender roles and, most importantly, how this neoliberalized masculine narrative commodifies the nuclear family, resulting in the self-actualization of the patriarch and the oppression of the other members.

## INTRODUCTION

In a mid-series episode of the overwhelmingly popular television drama, *Breaking Bad*, protagonist Walter White stands, mouth-agape, in the middle of a state-of-the-art meth lab, equipped with technology that average chemists can only dream of having (Más). In this scene, Walt is being offered a job that seems too good to be true – the opportunity to manufacture methamphetamine for the largest drug operation in the southwestern United States. Walt, however, initially turns down the offer. In response, drug kingpin Gustavo Fring asks, “What does a man do, Walter?” and answers, “A man provides for his family ... and he does it even when he is not appreciated or respected or even loved. He simply bears up and he does it because he is a man” (Más). The scene fades to black.

In this miniscule segment of television, Gus reiterates a cultural norm that resonates throughout history. Perhaps this idea has developed in different forms or manifestations across time and place, but for the majority, man has been constructed as the leader, the defender, and the provider. Contemporaneously, society seems to be moving away (if only at a glacial pace) from the male as the normative societal actor and toward the inclusion of other perspectives and other voices. Yet the white male presence still remains very much in charge of the definition of the political, social, and economic spheres. What is it, then, that compels Gus to dust off this somewhat antiquated narrative and make it explicit in the year 2010? The argument that a man must provide simply by virtue of being a man is not only essentializing, but also out of place, especially in a country such as the United States where equality supposedly rules the day and people seem unable to see the differences in such characteristics as gender or race.

Or is it out of place? One year before Walter White ever set foot in Gus Fring’s superlab, a popular pant company, Dockers, released an advertisement campaign called “Wear the Pants.”



Figure 1 (Lavelle, Desmond)

This particular image is of a silhouette of a male figure wearing a pair of Dockers with a message typed on the torso (Figure 1).

The message reads, “Behold the second dawn of man”

(Desmond). The campaign makes use of the outdated colloquialism, “wear the pants,” (akin to Gus’s “bear up”) in order to suggest that men have somehow lost their place as the provider. Two questions come to mind: when did men stop

wearing the pants and who wore the pants in their place? The

answer can be derived from a recent book, *Gendering the Recession*, in which popular culture feminists argue, “the semicollapse of the global financial system in 2007-8 inaugurated a set of profound cultural shifts” (Negra and Tasker 2014). One of these “shifts” refers to the way in which “advertising ... has effectively branded the economic crisis as a challenge to U.S. masculinity” (Negra and Tasker 2014). Their main argument is a reaction against the ever-growing conception that those affected most by the most recent recession were white, male businessmen. Moreover, that this popular perception sees women as being too prominent in the workforce, and thus creates the imperative that man must rise up and once again “wear the pants” in order to reoccupy their lost space.

Negra and Tasker derive their arguments from popular culture in a neoliberal era. Implemented in the 1980’s, Neoliberalism is a dominant global, political, and economic revival and expansion of free market policies that encourage private enterprise, reward personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiative, and undermine attempts by the government to interfere with the “natural” boom and bust cycles of the market (McChesney 1999; Ouellette 2004). As an ideology, neoliberalism celebrates self-empowerment primarily through the

acquisition of wealth, self-interest, and the notion that people are solely responsible for the choices that they make as free individuals (Lemke 2001). Though it is difficult to capture in words the overpowering, all-encompassing hold that neoliberalism has on the world, one can begin to make the connection between post-recessionary culture and its conflation of self-empowerment with the revival of a traditionally masculine narrative perceived to have been lost.

This call for individual empowerment on the part of the constructed emasculated male figure recalls both the Dockers advertisement and the scene from *Breaking Bad*. In a moment of curiosity, I took a second to Google the phrase, *what is Breaking Bad about*. I selected a synopsis offered up by the popular visual culture hub, IMDb. The summary begins, “When chemistry teacher Walter White is diagnosed with Stage III cancer and given only two years to live, he decides he has nothing to lose ... [;] determined to ensure that his family will have a secure future, Walt embarks on a career of drugs and crime” (IMDb). As I scrolled down this page and even looked at other links, a common theme emerged – that of a cause and effect structure framing cancer as both a death sentence and a call to action. Faced with impending death, then, the logic is that Walt is liberated – he sees clearly the opportunity to salvage his miserable life. Arguably, he too has heard the call for “the second dawn of man.” Gathering from the commonality of this synopsis structure across the web, it is safe to assume that many viewers are able to subscribe to this premise of the show before even watching. Moreover, the commonality in summaries suggests that people might be influenced by this cultural emphasis on the so-called reclamation of the masculine. The show is purposefully structured so that the viewer enters with an understanding that Walt’s masculinity is in question and that the cancer diagnosis is ultimately the cause of something greater – a development of said masculinity.

These online synopses, however, tend to erase the family for whom Walt is meant to provide – Skyler, his wife, and Walt Jr., his son who happens to have cerebral palsy. Located within this post-recessionary period, and arguably influenced by a masculinized neoliberalism, the television show, *Breaking Bad*, does focus on the transformation of high school chemistry teacher, Walter White into the drug kingpin of the southwestern United States. Yet there is more to consider than just Walt's transformation. Because the show is situated in this era that aims to revive the masculine narrative, the show can be somewhat restrictive. In that sense, this project pays close attention to the relationship between Walt and Skyler in order to reveal how the show is complicit in the revival of traditional, male-centric gender roles and, most importantly, how this neoliberalized masculine narrative commodifies the nuclear family, resulting in the self-actualization of the patriarch and the oppression of the other members.

## NEOLIBERAL CANCER

In order to understand how Walt's masculine narrative works against Skyler, it is necessary to analyze the distinct way in which *Breaking Bad* constructs Walt's cancer from the beginning. In the case of *Breaking Bad*, cancer is treated superficially, as purely a plot device. Walt receives his diagnosis and repeats it back to the doctor in a couple of sound bites, "lung cancer, inoperable ... best-case scenario, with chemo, I'll live another couple years" (Pilot 1/20/08). Walt recites his diagnosis in a flat tone suggesting that he is not surprised by it. Rather than treating the illness with the gravity that it deserves, cancer is constructed as the inevitable result of his half-baked life. *Breaking Bad* is purposefully structured around Walt's cancer diagnosis so as to suggest that the imperative to fight the illness is liberating. It is an igniting force, one that calls him to act in order to reclaim his masculinity. Cancer is associated with a creeping passivity that has found its way into Walt's soul against which he must strive not only to save himself, but also to ensure the security and progression of his family. In a neoliberal era of renewed individualism and self-promotion, cancer is metaphorically representative of a new disease – that of a weak masculinity which must be rooted out and destroyed.

The employment of cancer as a metaphorical tool does not sit well with renowned theorist and activist, Susan Sontag. A cancer survivor herself, Sontag argues against the language surrounding the illness because it tends to stigmatize those diagnosed and keep them from seeking treatment (Sontag 2). In the introduction to her book, *Illness as Metaphor*, she writes, "it is toward an elucidation of those metaphors, and a liberation from them, that I dedicate this inquiry" (Sontag 4). The aim of her book is to root out these metaphors surrounding illness and shed light on how they operate against people. One such metaphor is the association of cancer with passivity. Sontag cites an early figurative definition from the Oxford English Dictionary



stating, “cancer is anything that frets, corrodes, corrupts, or consumes slowly and secretly” (Sontag 10). In other words, cancer transforms the body to a feminized patient who passively awaits death. Walt, however, does not find his diagnosis or the subsequent reactions from friends and family to be debilitating. Instead of shrinking and shriveling under the weight of his diagnosis, Walt perceives it as an invitation to reinvent himself. What the show does construct as debilitating and corroding, from the very first episode, is Walt’s pathetic life. In essence, *Breaking Bad* makes use of the types of metaphors surrounding cancer, but associates them with a new illness – weak masculinity.

It is because of these metaphors attached to cancer that Walt can make use of his illness so as to hide his desire to rebuild his masculine pride and it is arguably the reason so many viewers bought into *Breaking Bad*’s basic premise. The show’s first episode sets this association up perfectly in its structure. The opening scene is built on the assumed ignorance of the viewer – revealing nothing about Walt’s cancer. It begins with a nameless man driving recklessly through the desert, preparing himself to either kill or be killed by the representatives of authority he perceives to be chasing him (Pilot). This man, if nothing else, is in control of his own body. He is not simply introduced; rather he asserts his own agency by taking his personal camera and introducing himself as Walter White. He is in charge of his own image in a recording that is “not an admission of guilt,” but instead a message to his family. Walt talks to the camera in such a way as to frame himself as the head of household, as a man who has sacrificed everything for the people he loves (Pilot). The ever-pressing question is why?

At once, Walt contains two identities – the reckless, wild man in the desert and the white, mild-mannered, family man. These two perceptions of Walt serve to create a contradiction in how he is read as a character. How does this old man, in his nerdy glasses and his not-so-sexy

underwear, fit in with the dozens of male American Western protagonists preceding him? The greatest concern becomes a question of how to read this man's masculinity, one that can only be answered by the scene's resolution later in the episode. Relative to the wild, introductory scene, that resolution is well off. The plotline is purposefully nonlinear, leaving viewers to ask what caused this stereotypically plain man to drive off recklessly into the desert. Causality is such an important factor because the manner in which Walt is introduced does not correspond to the family-friendly framework within which he introduces himself.

## WALT AND THE SYMBOLIC FAMILY

Over the course of the show, Walt frames his actions in relation to his family; in essence, his actions are rationalized by an imperative to save his family from economic hardship. The assumption for Walt here is that his cancer diagnosis means almost imminent death and that his wife and children will wither away without his support. To a strong degree, Walt views his family as dependents with little agency of their own. This is evidenced by the fact that Walt repeatedly invokes his family as his sole reason for making crystal meth. For Walt, the logic behind his decision must be that he would not undertake something so insanely risky if he thought his family could survive without him. Therefore, Walt sees himself as the defining factor of his family and likewise, his family is what gives the new criminal aspect of his life definition.

The initial imperative to save his family from economic trouble is invariably influenced by neoliberal economic policy. In the past three decades, there has been a shift in the expectation that the government be responsible for individual welfare. In a neoliberal, anti-welfare state of mind, the underlying assumption of the show is that Walt's family will have nowhere to turn if the male source of income dies. Social theorist and feminist, Anna Marie Smith argues that under neoliberalism, "the low-wage worker is encouraged to think only in terms of the immediate interests of his or her own household" (69). Because Walt does not seem to consider the members of his family as independent agents and because of this neoliberal drive to invest in the family, Walt perceives that his only feasible solution is to take responsibility and save his family from economic peril. Through this reasoning, Walt becomes a neoliberal ideal – his logic is noble and, more importantly, the perfect excuse to overcome a midlife crisis through reinvention in his pursuit of economic success.

Thus, in a recycling of traditional gender norms, Walt's masculinity is defined by his ability to provide. Central to *Breaking Bad* is the linkage of weak masculinity to lower class status – a male inability to maintain control of the home, let alone keep it afloat. Walt's weak sense of self is perceived as the reason that his family is barely scraping together a middle-class lifestyle. The narrative of *Breaking Bad* is not simply about a man desperate to provide for his family, but rather about the growth of his sense of masculinity in the process. If the show follows a traditional definition of masculinity – that of the sole male provider, the brute, the aggressor – then in order to grow, Walt needs something to overcome.

Enter Skyler White. She is the first character in the show at odds with Walt and ultimately, the person who must be subjugated so that he can reach a sense of fulfillment. Human history has consistently defined women by their relationship to men. Note the fact that Walt is always using his family to give his mission definition, yet Skyler is repeatedly constructed by her relationship to Walt and other men. Over the course of the show, Skyler is defined in three phases. The first phase encompasses roughly the first two seasons (essentially before Skyler is aware of Walt's meth scheme) and is concerned with how Walt physically subjugates her body and erases her agency in order to reassert his masculinity within the home. The second phase is reactionary – as a rational, independent actor in a neoliberal era, Skyler uses her body as a tool against her husband by sleeping with her boss, Ted. Note, that she is still defined by another male to whom she is subordinate, but the perceived significance here is that it is her choice. The third phase is marked by Skyler's ultimate co-optation and complicity in Walt's drug empire. She is the ideal, neoliberal housewife – responsible for her actions because of the choice she made to help her husband launder his money. This is not to say that these three phases do not

bleed into one another, but that they help in defining a progression by which a string of choices places Skyler at the center of her own demise.

## SUBJUGATION OF THE BODY AND MIND

As stated previously, the use of physical force to subjugate Skyler encompasses roughly the first two seasons of the show. On the one hand, this refers to the overt instances in which Walt sexually dominates Skyler. On the other hand, there is an equally powerful yet subtle force working simultaneously to keep Skyler compliant, passive, and in the home. This is Walt's withholding of information. His decision to begin cooking crystal methamphetamine without Skyler's knowledge sets up an imbalance in the power dynamic between husband and wife. If the narrative centers on the empowerment of one man as rational and dominant, it follows that Skyler, his wife, must be placed in opposition. It is Walt's lie that charges his newly realized masculinity because it allows him to create a space for himself outside the home. This secret life of crime that Walt creates for himself feeds his growing sense of masculinity and, in turn, slowly diminishes the importance of the other characters, particularly Skyler. In effect, the seeds are planted which allow the binaries that separate Walt and Skyler (male/female, active/passive, knowledgeable/ignorant) to take root and grow.

Naturally, the best place to first analyze the roots of Skyler's twofold oppression is in the "Pilot" episode of *Breaking Bad*. Inherent in this first episode is the beginnings of an imbalanced power dynamic in which Skyler's strong expression of femininity is ultimately placed in masculine terms. Throughout the entire "Pilot," Skyler displays a great degree of independence and strength, but that self-reliance works mostly as a tool to emphasize Walt's weak masculinity. It can be argued, at least in this first episode that Skyler takes on characteristics typically regarded as masculine. Moreover, these are traits lauded by a culture that celebrates self-empowerment and individualism. The show, unfortunately, is not about Skyler's agency – her story, rather, is only a facet of the larger narrative of Walter White. It is because of this frame

that the power Skyler commands is ultimately perceived to be threatening, she emasculates her husband at every turn. Skyler's strength is set in opposition to Walt's weakness and as a result she becomes the first obstacle Walt must overcome in reclaiming his masculinity.

Initially, in the screenplay for the episode, Skyler White is introduced in a way that describes what her appearance connotes: "Skyler's cute in a way most guys wouldn't have noticed back in high school. But not soft-cute. Not in the eyes. She's dressed for staying home – she's five months pregnant and just beginning to show" (Pilot Screenplay). The very first sentence constructs her by how she may or may not appeal to men. Initially, the intent that she is sized up by her level of attractiveness and her place in the home as the carrier of Walt's second child. For the sake of comparison, the five minutes prior to Skyler's introduction have been spent introducing Walt, not by his sex appeal, but by his actions. Though his outdated, stark-white underwear may be deemed unsexy, it is not the only thing that defines him. Skyler is explicitly characterized by her motherhood, by her look, and by the expressions in her face so as to denote her type of femininity and her place in the home. Skyler's appearance is meant to signify that of the traditional housewife.

Despite her lackluster, restrictive characterization in the screenplay, Skyler's first few lines indicate that she is very much in control of her domain and even upsets traditional gender roles. For Walt's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, she prepares a plate of scrambled eggs with the number 50 written in veggie bacon (Pilot). In response to Walt's look of disgust she says, "That is veggie bacon, believe it or not. Zero cholesterol and you won't even taste the difference." It is hard to discern whether Walt's look of revulsion is due to the bacon or to Skyler's infantilizing gesture. The veggie bacon slumps forward in Walt's hand, accentuating his weak masculinity through its flaccid physicality. Moreover, Skyler describes the bacon in a way that implies that Walt is not

meeting her expectations in the care of his body. This scene is crucial because she flips the familiar male desire to regulate female bodies and places it back onto Walt.

In the ensuing breakfast-table conversation, Skyler asks Walt what time he will be home from work and follows up with a command, “I don’t want them dicking you around tonight, you get paid ‘till five, you work ‘till five. No later” (Pilot). Skyler’s use of the word, “dicking” degrades Walt’s masculinity because she has clearly situated herself as head of household, telling Walt what he is able to do even outside of her domain, the home. “Dicking” is also (albeit offensively) sexually charged. It connotes rape culture and implies that Walt’s employer can easily take advantage of him. Skyler conforms to the use of masculine language in order to further emasculate her husband – his passivity is her target.

The reversal of the active male and passive female binary plays out further in a subsequent scene when Skyler and Walt are in bed. Skyler is sitting upright in bed in front of a computer and Walt is next to her, sinking slowly down into the bed. Skyler is preoccupied by the action on her computer – she is selling tchotchkes to supplement the family income. At the same time, she reaches over and begins to stroke her husband asking, “What’s going on down there? Is he asleep?” While Skyler is defined here by her actions, Walt is defined by his passivity, his impotence, and his inability to sufficiently provide for his family. As the scene continues, the rhythm of the bidding on Skyler’s product matches her power over Walt’s body until finally she screams, “Yes!” This is not as a result of Walt’s ejaculation, but a reaction to her success in selling though the two occur simultaneously. Walt may be the man of the house – working double shifts in order to support the family, but in this scene, Skyler’s entrepreneurial prowess is celebrated. Thus far in the “Pilot” Skyler proves herself to be in command of Walt’s body, his sexuality, and her own ability to act as a provider for the household.



Unfortunately, the attention given to Skyler's abilities as an active participant in the household is quickly displaced in favor of a focus on Walt's interest in making meth. As noted previously, Skyler's strong presence in this episode serves the purpose of underscoring how weak her husband is in comparison. That is not to dismiss her agency or to diminish her characterization as an assertive female character, but rather to make the point that this powerful femininity is constructed and put forth simply as an obstacle that Walt must overcome. Instead of a narrative whose focus is an adept, highly capable woman, *Breaking Bad* focuses on the reclamation of Walt's masculinity. Thus Skyler's agency becomes a threat that must simultaneously be embraced, and yet muted.

This silencing of Skyler becomes a reality in the final scene of the "Pilot" in which Walt has just come home from his first foray into cooking meth and climbs into bed next to Skyler who is wide awake, but on her side, turned away from him. Wondering where he has been she tells him, "I don't know what's been going on with you lately, but whatever it is, I'll tell you this: I do not like it when you don't talk to me. The worst thing you can do is shut me out" (Pilot). The power dynamic has slipped out of Skyler's control – she now has to remind him of her need to be kept in the loop. Walt has access to information outside of Skyler's circle. To some degree, this knowledge (or lack thereof) defines her level of independence. Subtle, yes, but inherent in this scene is the construction of Skyler's dependency – she cannot sleep without him next to her and she cannot maintain a sense of her own control without knowing what her husband is feeling and doing. In response, Walt does not empathize with her concerns or waver under her veiled threat. Instead, in a display of masculine power, he begins to have sex with her from behind. Skyler looks shocked, almost afraid, and she asks, "Walt, is that you?" (Pilot). He answers her not through communication as equal, but rather through action and domination of

his subordinate. This final scene mirrors the earlier bedroom scene in order to show how the roles have reversed. Skyler, once actively sitting upright in bed is now passively on her side, with her back toward her husband. Walt, is not simply active, he is an aggressor, sexually overpowering Skyler in an attempt to assert his renewed sense of masculinity.

Moreover, it can be argued that this scene makes visible the gritty underbelly of neoliberal ideology. Walt has just transformed a day of high risk (near-capture, near-death) into a high reward (thousands more dollars than he had previously) and in doing so feels a replenished sense of masculine energy. That energy is what he uses in order to control and subjugate the feminine in order to prolong his high. Skyler is reduced to a mere object of Walt's desire to the extent that she does not even recognize the man in her own bed. And this is not the only time this type of aggression occurs.

Skyler is overpowered to an even greater degree in the first episode of season two, "Seven Thirty-Seven." In the first scene of the episode, Walt faces death head-on in an encounter with mid-level drug dealer, Tuco Salamanca. Feeling disrespected, Tuco beats one of his henchmen to death with his fists; he violates the man's agency and his bodily boundaries to a point of no return. The scene changes to Skyler as she hears Walt coming through the front door. Hearing the door slam, she leaves her bathroom and walks down the hall only to hear a distorted male voice from the television say, "Are already married —." Skyler approaches Walt who is mindlessly flipping channels almost as if he needs something to control – something to physically manipulate. As Walt follows Skyler into the kitchen, he breathes heavily, appearing to be on the verge of tears. The trauma Walt has just experienced is twofold – he realizes that he is out of his depth in the drug trade and that his burgeoning sense of masculinity has just been shattered by Tuco's brutal display of violence. Walt grabs Skyler, pushes her against the fridge,

and proceeds to rape her. His own vulnerability exposed, it is almost as if Walt is attempting to displace his trauma onto Skyler. He uses her body in an attempt to regain a sense of control, forcing his own sexuality onto his wife to establish dominance, to remind himself of his masculinity. Skyler is further objectified by the green facial mask she is wearing; it obscures her facial expressions and emphasizes the brutality of Walt's own actions. Though she forcefully stops Walt, her agency is made subordinate to the overbearing masculine narrative. In a sense, her vulnerability replaces his – her composure and dignity broken as represented by a smear of green dashed across the door of the refrigerator.

The tiny clip heard on the television, “Are already married –,” caught only with careful attention as Skyler walks down the hall is a haunting reminder as to why this scene is often easily overlooked. In an essay on the politics of rape, feminist Catharine MacKinnon argues that because the definition of rape centers on male agency, legally it is seen as “more a crime against female monogamy (exclusive access by one man) than against women's sexual dignity or intimate integrity” (MacKinnon 42). The sacred weight that society places on marriage and monogamy makes it too easy for viewers to write this scene off as a moment of Walt's overwhelming passion rather than to analyze this scene as evidence of Skyler's oppression. Moreover, in a culture where rape is still defined by male loss, there is a tendency to see Walt as taking advantage of his own property. It is difficult for many viewers to define this moment as rape because Walt keeps it in the family; Skyler has not broken her virtuous monogamy therefore the rape seems more consensual until she finally screams for Walt to stop.

As the scene continues, Walt backs away from Skyler, presumably shocked by his own actions, and Skyler takes heavy breaths, recovering from her assault. Walt sits outside and Skyler walks out after him saying, “I know you're scared and you're angry and you're frustrated. And I

know none of this is fair. But you cannot take it out on me” (Seven Thirty-Seven). Skyler claims to “know,” and to some extent she senses the frustrations of her husband. The problem, however, is that she thinks of his actions in terms of his cancer, and is completely unaware of Walt’s scheming. At this point, Skyler has become a tool for the construction of Walt’s own identity and the object of his frustrations with his own vulnerability. Both are debilitating, but are not nearly as crippling as the subtle fact that she does not know the true reason behind her own objectification. This scene underscores the subtle truth that Walt has effectively created a space for himself outside of the knowledge of his supposedly equal partner. There is a hidden aggression in Walt’s misinformation. She is forced to empathize with Walt without knowing the extent that she is a tool for Walt’s frustrations with his own unfulfilled masculinity. To a certain degree, Skyler’s lack of information leaves her with no choice but to tell her husband “you can’t take it out on me.” Reminiscent of her empty threat at the end of the “Pilot” episode where she tells Walt to keep her in the loop, her demand falls on deaf ears. This is reinforced by the simple fact that Walt says absolutely nothing in response. The point being that to some extent, through his silence, Walt is playing up the metaphors surrounding his cancer. The reasoning being what can she really demand from the husband whom she perceives is about to die? Skyler is immobilized, caught between her disgust with what has just transpired and her inability to fully communicate to Walt how she feels.

Overall, one of the goals of the first two seasons of *Breaking Bad* appears to be the initial development of Walt’s masculinity. The result of this being that Skyler is subsumed into Walt’s masculine transformation. Despite her commanding presence within the home, her entrepreneurial spirit, and her insistence that she be kept in the informational loop, her agency is trumped repeatedly. The focus of the show is Walt’s cancer and how he reacts to it. That, in turn,

limits Skyler's ability to do much else besides worry about her husband getting the treatment he needs. In this first phase of the show she becomes both a victim of Walt's displaced physical aggression and the target of his concealment of information. Both of which are meant to keep her compliant in his illusion of the average, domesticated American family.

## RESISTANCE

As discussed in the previous section, the problem for Walt, and arguably the creators of the show, is that Skyler is not completely submissive. Her representation does not fit neatly into the traditional portrayal of female characters. What *Breaking Bad* does instead is depict a strong, competent woman with the insight and the gumption to call out her husband when she deems it necessary. The problem, however, is that despite the appearance of agency, Skyler is only as powerful as Walt's overarching narrative will allow. When she does finally clue into the secrets that Walt has been hiding, Skyler does seek the opportunity for resistance and what should ideally become liberation. The extent of Walt's double life is privileged information meant solely for his associates in the drug trade. By accessing forbidden knowledge, Skyler crosses the boundary between the family and the economic sphere and challenges the very gender binary meant to keep her oppressed.

An awareness of his secrets gives Skyler the chance to destabilize Walt's security in his familial foundation. She does this primarily by challenging Walt's place in the home and his understanding of their marital monogamy. Yet, her agency cannot be fully realized because of structural pressures that favor her eventual reinstallation into the traditional nuclear family. Thus, *Breaking Bad* becomes less about Skyler's growth as a complicated female character than about the threat she poses to Walt's renewed masculinity and his drug business. Though she resists his machinations and empowers herself to some degree, Skyler is constructed as a character who needs to be handled.

This construction of the feminine as problematic, as something to be dealt with, is not a new concept. Women have faced this representation of themselves in popular culture for centuries. In a foundational essay entitled "The Madwoman in the Attic," feminist literary

theorists, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, detail and take issue with the ways in which women are constructed in narrative. Gilbert and Gubar make the argument that literature is written by men to appease the sensibilities of male gender (Gilbert and Gubar 1979). Furthermore, they make the distinction between two restrictive archetypes that have characterized women throughout literary history –the “angel” and the “monster.” Each of these defines women by essential characteristics; this means that women in literary works simply appear as either pure and passive or evil, heartless, and sexually deviant. These definitions limit the female character to her sexuality and the way in which she interacts with, relates to, and appeases men. The trouble with Skyler’s representation in *Breaking Bad* is that rather than have her own dynamic narrative, her storyline follows her embodiment of either the nagging “bitch” housewife or the complicit neoliberal angel. These two types are attributed to Skyler depending on her cooperation with Walt at any given moment.

One caveat here is still the fact that at times, Skyler does not fit neatly into a traditional portrayal of women. There are key moments in which she is explicitly defiant for the sake of undermining Walt’s conception of masculinity. This presents a problem for the plot because the show centers on the self-empowerment of this one masculine individual. How, then, does the show incorporate this challenging female presence? *Breaking Bad* purposefully constructs Skyler as non-submissive, but in the overarching context of Walt taking it upon himself to save his family. In this light, Skyler’s combativeness is construed as ungrateful and her resistance (unexplained to the rest of the family) unreasonable. Moreover, if Skyler and Walt were true equals, she would arguably have been well aware of her husband’s actions from the beginning. As an intelligent, ethical woman, Skyler most likely would not have let Walt get carried away

which obviously means there could be no show. Shows like *Breaking Bad* thrive on drama and tension, but why does it tend come at the cost of true female empowerment?

No matter how innovative the narrative, popular culture tends to devalue the female presence in favor of the maintenance of male dominance. Throughout, but not limited to, the third season, Skyler is constructed as the “bitch” housewife. Walt Jr. is the first to label her in such a way, but Skyler herself, and viewers of the show writing on various fan message boards, incorporate the use of this term as well. These represent a pressure that eventually force Skyler back in alignment with Walt. In addition, *Breaking Bad* associates Skyler’s knowledge about Walt with an opportunity of choice – she may turn him in or accept complicity in his scheme. Without regarding the pressures that she faces, Skyler is given the illusion of freedom in which her decision displaces the construction of her as victim in place of her role as an agent of her own demise.

In order to understand how these factors culminate in Skyler’s eventual complicity, it becomes necessary to trace her attempt at breaking from Walt’s physical and psychological control. That being said, one of the most powerful Skyler moments occurs in the final scene of season two when she demands that Walt leave the house, having finally traced the web of lies keeping her passive and silent (ABQ). In one of the show’s most calculated soliloquies, Skyler unloads everything that she has discovered about Walt’s second life in the past seven weeks since the invasive surgery that put his cancer in remission. Skyler traces his deception from one piece of evidence – her correct suspicion that Walt was carrying a second cellphone. This clue carries such symbolic weight because the idea of having a hidden phone represents veiled communication. Moreover, it harkens back to the final scene of the “Pilot” where Skyler warns Walt that the worst thing he could possibly do is not communicate with her. The second



cellphone is the key by which she is able to solve all of the other mysteries that have plagued her and kept her subject to her husband's will. This emblem of silence, of hidden communication, is the very same symbol that gives Skyler the strength to verbally speak out and demand that Walt leave the home.

Undoubtedly, this scene is physically empowering for Skyler; it shows that she is extremely perceptive and capable of holding her own. There is, however, a subtle problem with this display of power – her gaining an advantage over Walt is an exception, not the rule of the entire series. This instance does lend itself to the construction of Skyler as a non-submissive female character, but it cannot be the only understanding of her. It becomes necessary to place this scene in the context of the previous seasons so as not to see Skyler as an ungrateful monster, forcing her husband out of his home, but rather to recognize her as a beleaguered victim, taking a stand against his oppressive deception. Unfortunately, Skyler is repeatedly placed in a position whereby she can only occupy one binary or the other. This restrictive narrative is a testament to the way in which women are in a constant state of being perceived and read, whereas men are constantly in a state of action that does not need definition, it simply is.

Skyler moves forward nonetheless, attempting to prove that she can be equally as active as Walt. She takes the next rational step in their separation and consults a divorce attorney. In “No Más,” Skyler goes to Walt's new apartment to bring him divorce papers. He looks at them in dismay and asks her, “Why are you doing this? Why are you even thinking this way? Is it to punish me?” Walt cannot seem to understand why his wife would be asking him to sign the papers, almost as if he is still trying to maintain his lie. He even goes as far as to construct himself as the victim in their relationship. His more established sense of masculinity allows him to manipulate his identity. Unlike Skyler, Walt can control how he is perceived because his

actions determine the course of the narrative; alternatively, his presence is not under constant scrutiny and therefore, he can come off as passive and clueless in an effort to reincorporate Skyler back into his concept of the nuclear family.

He even goes so far as to assert, “We are happily married.” as if saying it can make it reality. Walt undermines her gesture in such a way as to discount her agency – as the male, he has the power to define their union. For Walt, Skyler’s hurt feelings are simply that; he does not take her seriously. If anything, he is so emboldened by his own cause and his sense of self-sacrifice for his family that Skyler’s feelings are simply an unavoidable casualty of his work to keep his family afloat. This further reinforces the construction of Skyler as ungrateful – how could she possibly ask for a divorce when everything he has done has been for the family?

Though Skyler appears to hold all of the cards by keeping Walt out of the house, she is only able to do so because Walt is caught off guard. This is simply another situation in which the focus is how Walt adapts to keep Skyler in line. In comparison with the “Pilot” where Skyler is depicted as active so as to emphasize her husband’s weak masculinity, the new Walt embraces passivity. Walt is well aware of how both he and Skyler are perceived and he uses that to his advantage by emulating the feeble persona he had at the beginning of the series. Walt passively moves out of the house instead of fighting Skyler, constructing himself as the victim and her as the aggressor. Skyler, in effect, faces a double bind. She cannot keep Walt in the house because she cannot trust him, but she also cannot confide in her family members, herself undecided about whether or not she feels comfortable turning him in. Skyler refuses to give a reason as to why she has evicted Walt from the house so suddenly. The tendency, then, is to fit her into the old-fashioned trope of the irrational female. Walt has essentially imposed a new method of control – one that allows outside characters to unwittingly do his work for him.

Walt's power comes from his controlled ability to maintain distance. His absence from the family begins to affect the characters, especially Walt Jr. who has been blindsided by his parents' separation. In "Caballo Sin Nombre," the family, including Hank and Marie, are at the White residence for dinner. Set off by something that Skyler says to him, Walt is figuratively brought back into the house by the ensuing argument. Walt Jr. tells Skyler that Walt had red eyes that morning as if he had been crying; he accuses her of being heartless; and as he storms out of the room, he asks, "Why do you gotta be such a bitch?" Ironically, Walt had been maced earlier in the day, accounting for the red eyes that Walt Jr. references. Regardless of his absence, Walt's image commands enough power to drive the action in the scene, compelling his son to act on his behalf.

Walt's lingering presence in the house speaks to the pervasive power of the traditional, patriarchal family. The way he was forced out so quickly and without reason seems to cross a line, as evidenced by Walt Jr.'s outburst at the dinner table. This is arguably because as much as Walt needs his family in order to give him purpose, Walt Jr. and even Skyler are constructed as needing that cohesive whole in order to feel complete. To that effect, Walt begins to appear at the house. It is this imperative that the family stay together which keeps him coming back, obviously regarding Skyler's position on his eviction challengeable. In "I.F.T.," Skyler comes home from work to find Walt in the house refusing to leave. He is calm, making himself at home where he is clearly not welcome. He does not act, but it is not to be mistaken for weakness. Skyler responds by calling the police, threatening to tell them everything. In response, Walt claims, "This family is everything to me. Without it, I have nothing to lose." For Walt, family is consistently the object he uses in order to justify his decision to manufacture methamphetamine, but it also, unfortunately, represents something over which he can claim a majority of the

control. Also, this passive display makes him seem like a martyr willing to put himself on the line to reclaim the love of his beloved wife. Based on how he manipulates and subjugates Skyler, family may have once meant something to him, but now it is simply the vehicle by which he continues to reclaim his masculinity. Though the act of sitting silently is passive, the intention is aggressive; Walt is in control. He knows he can force his wife's hand and his timing is impeccable as evidenced by what follows.

Skyler does call the police, but Walt has foreseen that Walt Jr. will arrive before they get there. When the policemen do finally arrive, Walt Jr. confronts Skyler asking, "you called the cops on dad?" (I.F.T.). Through cold calculation, Walt positions their son against Skyler in order to construct her as the heartless "bitch" who is unreasonably forcing their family apart. This scene exacerbates Skyler's weak feminine presence by placing her in a room full of men, their questions directed more at her than at Walt. The police officer tells Skyler, "We can't arrest a man for breaking into his own house." This scene emphasizes the blatant inclination toward masculine authority; the house is Walt's despite Skyler's explanations of having changed the locks and her desire to see him removed. She has no authority. The implicit cultural assertion here is that men have the power to define a situation while the single woman is further alienated as the object of their criticism. Furthermore, the refusal on the part of the police to take Skyler seriously suggests that there is a shared interest between the men in enforcing the unity of the patriarchal, nuclear family.

This isolation that Skyler faces, then, is due to her characterization as the "monster" of the house (Gilbert and Gubar 1979). In contrast, Walt's passivity allows him to project an illusion of domesticity to the policemen, as he coddles their daughter Holly as she begins to cry. Almost as if on cue, Walt Jr. chimes in, "It's my mom's fault. She won't even say what my dad

did. Its because he didn't do anything. I don't know why she's being this way. My dad is a great guy." The irony is palpable – Skyler, who has done nothing but work toward keeping her children safe from the husband she thought she knew is punished for showing resolve and for attempting to disrupt the sanctity of a monogamous home. Furthermore, when asked if she had any suspicions of her husband's involvement with illegal activity, Skyler responds no. The implicit and explicit pressure placed on Skyler by both Walt and their son are what keep her from blowing the whistle on her husband.

While Walt repeatedly invokes his family to his advantage, Skyler seems to only have the family on her mind. The show invariably argues that these perspectives are two internalized sides of the same coin – Walt's entitlement as the patriarch to objectify his family for his benefit and the social pressure Skyler feels to lie in order to maintain a semblance of order. While Walt simply becomes the man in charge, Skyler faces a paradox of representation on all sides. To elaborate, he has knowledge of Walt's illicit acts which should presumably give him power over her, yet the show works to construct her strong attachment to the family as an indication that she is a loving mother above all else. Simultaneously, Walt acts in such a way as to displace his feelings of alienation from the family onto her by making her appear hysterical and unreasonable in the eyes of Walt Jr.. Skyler moves from category to category, but described in a way that does let her simply be – she is more rigidly ascribed one characteristic or another rather than as a person containing multitudes.

"I.F.T." is such a pivotal episode because it reflects and reinforces so many of the themes building between Skyler and Walt. Having lost the ability to keep her husband out of the house, Skyler relegates herself to the bedroom with Holly in order to avoid Walt at all costs. Eventually, he tricks her into coming out so that they can have a conversation. A black bag with

all of Walt's earnings spans the gulf between them. Walt begins by telling Skyler, "I've done a terrible thing, but I did it for a good reason. I did it for us." (I.F.T.). Walt makes a quintessential neoliberal argument in that making meth, effectively ensuring the suffering of thousands of users, is justifiable because of the freedom of opportunity that his self-earned wealth will afford his family. Moreover, he equates a moral good with the imperative of providing for his family, his white, heteronormative, and patriarchal family. He then proceeds to list a numerous things that his money can buy. And what do they all have in common? College tuition for the kids, SAT prep tutors, health insurance – they all ensure the advancement and maintenance of his family's privilege. The individual freedom to invest in the successful future of one's own family is a critical tenet in the neoliberal era (Smith 69). Moreover, the physical presence of the bag of money makes it perfectly clear that for Walt, the ability to provide for one another takes precedence over any sort of communal bond. Walt goes on and Skyler tries to interject, but he silences her. The money bag, left open so carefully between them, Walt's language, and the fact that he is doing all of the talking makes this "conversation" seem like a business pitch, meant to tantalize Skyler with all that his meth making has to offer. The catch implied is that by accepting his money, Skyler must symbolically welcome him back into the home and into her bed. He must be officially reinstated as the patriarch of the White household.

Walt's speech makes him appear as if he has fallen from grace. He admits that he has done terrible things and even worse, he will have to live with them forever (I.F.T.). He appears to be honest about his actions without ever actually acknowledging what he has done. This narrative is constructed in such a way as to allow Walt to project the appearance of having an inner well of deep remorse. When in reality it is just another attempt to reincorporate the female counterpart into his now unstable family construct. Skyler is the first character to find out about

Walt's double life because she is the only one with the power to disable its foundation – the familial rationale upon which it sits. Arguably, Skyler is allowed to resist Walt because the sacred nature of the family and the imperative that monogamy must prevail is such an internalized concept in Western society. Therefore, pitting husband against wife exacerbates the drama that Walt must endure in order to reclaim his masculinity by way of subordinating his wife and preserving the sanctity of his nuclear family.

If the show is to some degree about the reclamation of Walt's household throne, then it is somewhat ironic that in the final scene of "I.F.T.," the gender roles between Walt and Skyler have reversed. Skyler comes home from a day at the office, while Walt is at home cooking dinner for the family, pinned up in an apron. He tells her that he appreciated the talk they had that morning and says facetiously, "Honesty is good, don't you think?" This line is perfect because it recalls the mountain of lies that kept Skyler in line with her assigned gender roles and her place within the home. Moreover, it underscores the fact that Walt still has so many secrets that if revealed would most likely send Skyler straight to her divorce attorney. For all of these reasons, Walt's tongue-in-cheek, demeaning question is put entirely to bed when Skyler says, "I fucked Ted." In effect, she does what Walt finds impossible to do. She tells the truth and it completely destabilizes Walt's masculinity; he could never have guessed when he started making methamphetamine that it would drive his wife to break their sacred vow of monogamy. What Skyler does with these three little words is force him to realize that she can and has (at least momentarily) trumped his masculinity by removing herself from his narrative.

This is arguably one of the most powerful instances in which Skyler resists the masculine narrative structure imposed on her by Walt. It lacks, however, in that Skyler is yet again defined by her relationship to a man – her boss, Ted Beneke. This representation focuses not on her

savvy or intellect, but on her ability to share her body with another man. Ultimately, *Breaking Bad* is always about Walt and the development of the masculinized narrative of self-empowerment. It is for this reason that despite her resistance and her potential to be a powerfully independent character, Skyler is unable to completely escape being defined by Walt's actions and is eventually incorporated into his drug empire.



## CONCLUSION

*Breaking Bad* is a show that came out of a specific cultural moment – during the slow recovery period after the recession of 2007 and 2008. As noted by Negra and Tasker, this resulted in the propagation of the perception that women were actively choosing to leave the workplace in order to make room for men (2014). This was conflated with the idea that men had somehow lost a sense of an essential and traditional masculinity. To that effect, post-recessionary culture called upon men to reclaim their jobs and, by association, their identities. This cultural phenomenon, however, is only a facet of the roughly three-decade-long process of neoliberalization characterized by faith in the power of unregulated capitalism and the belief in the self-empowerment of the individual.

*Breaking Bad* sets up a narrative that combines the imperative of the male to reclaim his role as a provider with a desire to embody the spirit of independence offered by neoliberalism. Walt, as a character in this neoliberalized masculine narrative, represents an ideal with whom viewers can relate – especially those who identify as white male. Ultimately, the aim of this project was to go beyond this narrative because it purports an illusion of weakness within a very privileged group. Through an analysis of the beginnings of the relationship between Walt and Skyler (specifically the first three seasons) I was able to better understand how it could be undermined, but also how the masculine narrative is ultimately designed to keep the patriarchal nuclear family in tact at the cost of other, marginalized groups.

In terms of further research, there is the possibility to analyze the masculine narratives that play out in terms of other relationships – Hank and Marie for example. Walt Jr. alone would be an important case study because of the way the show represents him through his disability. It could almost be argued that the show makes him out to be the result of Walt's weak masculinity

simply because they share the same name and because Jr. is so passive throughout the entire show. Ultimately, it would be interesting to analyze certain online communities and their venom and vitriol surrounding Skyler's character. Arguably, they offer a litmus test for how popular the masculine reclamation narrative is and how it encourages a return to traditional gender norms.

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